

Research Materials/Source Documents
AWARDS & DECORATIONS

FILE TITLE: Air Force Cross Recipient: Sgt Russell M. Hunt

Reviewed by:

AFEHRI Representative G. R. Akin date 12 DEC 97

EPC Representative Joe Chen date 16 Dec 97

Scanner Operator Sung Hoon date 16 Dec 97

APPROVED BY: Gary R. Akin
GARY R. AKIN, CMSgt, USAF
Director
Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute

HUNT, RUSSELL M.

"Sergeant Russell M. Hunt distinguished himself by extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an opposing armed force as a mechanic on a UH-1F helicopter in Southeast Asia on 31 March 1967. On that date, Sergeant Hunt's aircraft was shot down while participating in the evacuation of a beleaguered party of American and Allied ground forces. Despite painful injuries and continuous hostile fire, Sergeant Hunt rendered aid to increasing numbers of wounded personnel. When hostile actions forced a movement of the ground party, Sergeant Hunt assisted in carrying his mortally wounded aircraft commander in an exhausting trek to a designated landing zone. In the landing area, Sergeant Hunt again exposed himself to the hostile field of fire to give manual landing directions to the recovery helicopters, refusing evacuation until all seriously wounded personnel had been airlifted from the scene...."

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**"The medic heard me calling and came over.
'The major is dead,' he said. That's what gets you.
You do all you can and it's still not enough.
It really hurts."**

by ED BLAIR,

"When I brought my chopper back in late that afternoon, there stood old Hunt, cool as a crew chief on a stateside ramp, waving me down through the trees and bamboo stalks surrounding the clearing he had helped make. Soon as I loaded he waved me off and I left him there with the small arms fire popping around the perimeter not much more than a hundred feet away. Still standing, Hunt guided in the second and third Hueys the same way. Not until he got the most seriously wounded aboard did he come out on the third aircraft."

Maj. Robert D. Allen was describing the action as he saw it from his UH-1F on March 31, 1967. "Old Hunt" was Sgt. Russell M. Hunt from Charleston, W. Va., not yet 21. But Hunt's reactions that day during several action-packed hours near a forward-operating base in the Republic of Vietnam left no doubt about his maturity. Major Allen (then captain) and a half-dozen other eyewitnesses told the story of how Sergeant Hunt became the second living enlisted airman to earn the Air Force Cross, this nation's second highest award for valor.

The son of a West Virginia coal miner and a working mother, Russ Hunt was the third of six children. He learned to accept responsibility early, doing odd jobs after school when he wasn't training for the 880 yard

relay with the track team. It took but a few weeks of the year he had been a helicopter mechanic with the all-volunteer Nha Trang-based 20th Helicopter Squadron's Flight "E" to earn such descriptions as "a real fine troop, with more initiative than most."

"You could almost call Sergeant Hunt aggressive," says Maj. John W. Elftmann, operations officer and one-time commander of the unit. "Didn't wait to be told when something needed doing. He was so eager to fly missions that he would land in one Huey, then walk over to another crew getting ready to take off just to see if they needed another man. He was a good man to have aboard, too. The pilots knew he would do everything he could to keep them out of a box. We flew down through some pretty small holes in that jungle. Sergeant Hunt would be right there hanging out the door watching the tail rotor."

For three months Hunt had been getting plenty of flying time—up to 200 hours a month—he guessed. And he got a lot of it on temporary duty supporting Army Special Forces. On a Thursday evening, Russ Hunt was called from the movie for a briefing on the upcoming mission. About 130 friendly troops, including their US Army advisors, were pinned down up in the hill country.

AIRMAN

They were surrounded by an estimated 700 enemy troops. Their situation was grim. Water was gone and ammunition was running low. Casualties had been heavy. They desperately needed help. Army helicopter gunships would cover while Flight "E" went in slick, without offensive weapons, and use hoists to lower water and ammo and bring out the most seriously wounded.

Hunt and his regular crew were assigned to the lead aircraft.

HERE were four of them, plus an extra man, a Special Forces medic. Maj. Robert Baldwin, flight commander, would be pilot. Lt. David E. Lyall would be copilot. AIC Sandy Pratcher, another Mountain Stater, from Wheeling, would be Hunt's assistant. Mechanics went to work removing the guns from the four helicopters and installing one of the flight's four hoists on each of the first three birds.

By mid-morning Friday, they were over the battlefield, a five square mile area of bomb-cratered hill country clothed with dense jungle. The out-numbered friendlies and the enemy were down there in a wooded area. The gunships had been drawing heavy automatic weapons fire. The Forward Air Controller (FAC) was calling in some "Hobo" (A-1E *Skyraider*) pilots diverted from another mission to put down the automatics.

A little later the FAC called. He knew for sure that two of the automatic weapons had been knocked out. The third one too, he thought, but he was less than certain about it. The "Hoboes" had gone high and dry, but stood ready to cover if Major Baldwin wanted to try.

"The major asked if we wanted to go in," Russ remembers. "We all said, 'Okay let's go for broke.'"

Canteens of water and boxes of ammunition were already lashed to the jungle penetrator on the hoist. Baldwin eased his Huey down over the small hole in the jungle canopy near the top of the hill where the friendlies were. Hovering at about 100 feet, he gently sailed the birds over the hole.

Sergeant Hunt was maneuvering the hoist toward the chimney-like opening.

"Ten feet right," he said. "Now, ten feet forward. Steady. Steady. Right there."

Then all hell broke loose below! As the small arms fire grew more intense, there came the unmistakable sound of heavy automatics! Charley had kept some in reserve. Russ Hunt was too busy to be interrupted when Major Baldwin heard the Army captain, with the FAC in the O-1E *Birdog*, yell, "Look out! Look out! You are drawing ground fire!"

"I was leaning out of the ship, one hand on the cable, guiding it down," Hunt told AIRMAN. "Suddenly the cable zipped through my fingers and I heard the major saying, 'hold it, hold it.' I turned around to tell him the cable was shot away just as Lieutenant Lyall

turned loose of the jettison switch and reached for the controls. The ship banked left and went into a wildly vibrating nose dive. I threw down the hoist control and grabbed a seat to keep from being thrown out."

The rotor blades struck the tree tops and slapped the helicopter backward into an upright position. As the branches splintered the rotor and severed the tail boom they broke the force of the fall. The chopper settled upright on the ground almost on top of the jettisoned hoist that had missed the Army team leader by a scant three feet. The badly wounded man had hoped to go out on that hoist. Someone dragged him out of the way of the crashing aircraft.

As he jumped out on the right side close to the friendly command post, Hunt saw Major Baldwin leave the aircraft. Lieutenant Lyall, Airman Pratcher and the Special Forces medic went out the left side and soon came around the nose of the aircraft. When they counted noses, the pilot was missing. The "Hobo" pilots were boring in again. While they kept the enemy busy, Sergeant Hunt and Lieutenant Lyall retrieved the medical kit and their M-16s from the downed aircraft.

"Speaking for myself, I was scared to death," Lyall, now a captain, said recently. "I remember it took me a long time to talk myself into calming down. But both Hunt and Pratcher, although they were scared too, seemed to be pretty well composed."

"Some of the Army troops didn't make us feel any better. 'Thanks for trying,' they said, 'but it looks like you'll go down the tubes with us. We've been here three days and can't last another night.' Not very reassuring when you're down in the jungle grass on your belly with Charley banging away at nearly point blank range."

The A-1E "Hobo" pilots bought them relative safety a few minutes at a time with their 250-pound bombs and 20mm cannon fire. Major Baldwin had been spotted lying in the grass off the nose of the aircraft. Two Green Beret troops helped him back to the others. He had a serious abdominal wound but he had already contacted the airborne elements of Flight "E" on his survival radio. They knew what it was like on the ground.

ATER and ammunition that had come in on the sheared hoist was distributed. The 50 canteens held enough to give every man one drink. Their next sip of water was many hours away. Meanwhile, Lieutenant Lyall, Sergeant Hunt and the medic were treating the most seriously wounded. Overhead, Captain Allen moved in for a rescue attempt. He was driven off by ground fire. The FAC called in another flight of "Hoboes" to pound the enemy back into silence. But the silence lasted only until Captain Allen tried again to drop his hoist to Major Baldwin and the other wounded. It became obvious that they must move off the hill away from the automatic weapons. But where?

An experienced Jolly Green pilot before joining the 20th Helicopter Sq., Lyall had learned to look for alternate landing and pick-up zones where his aircraft could get in and out. Hunt, too, made mental notes of such sites as likely escape routes. Both remembered a bomb crater near the stream at the bottom of the hill they had hovered over that morning. The FAC confirmed its position. Lyall marked it on the ground forces commander's map and suggested they move.

Charley was increasing the pressure on them, moving in with more and more frequent probes. The allied troops were saving ammunition, firing only when they had a definite target. Only the gunships and A-1Es were really effective now.

A shout from the perimeter. Charley was massing, moving in with a big force. There were about two minutes left for an air strike that would stop them. The FAC put his smoke rocket right where he was told, about 50 meters out. Now, that was too far out. Huddled in the high grass, the downed airmen could hear fire well inside the perimeter. Lieutenant Lyall opened fire with his M-16, squeezing off single shots when he saw a target.

"Hobo, Hobo," called the Army team leader. "Put your ordnance 15 meters this side of smoke."

That was calling it in pretty close. Almost too close. But it had to be there if they were going to survive. The situation had been growing steadily worse for the past three hours. By now each of them had some sort of wound. Lyall was bleeding from hits in the back and wrist. Sandy Pratcher caught steel fragments in his backside when he hadn't pulled it down far enough during one of the enemy probes. Only Hunt was relatively unscathed. He had a nick across the cheek from a flying projectile. They had to try for that bomb crater where the stream would help shield them long enough to get the helicopters in.

Air strike after air strike was called. The "Hobo" pilots laid down their Charley-purging iron bombs and cannon fire just ahead of the friendlies. When a pass was completed, the Special Forces leader moved his forward perimeter into the area and hitched up his rear guard while the A-1Es made their next pass. Meter by meter the troops and the downed crew moved along the 500 meter route blasted out for them. Hunt and Pratcher carried the critically wounded Major Baldwin who was now unconscious. Lieutenant Lyall carried their M-16s and ammunition. Hunt kept a grenade "just in case."

"We stayed away from the trail because the VC usually booby trap them," Hunt said. "It was really rough and slow going. Hot too. About 110 degrees. The major must have weighed 190 pounds. There was broken bamboo all over the ground. Slippery. Trees, big and little, to climb over or go around. Bombs had plowed up the ground so the dirt was loose and slippery. It was all down hill. I hadn't eaten since 0500 that

morning. I was thirsty and had no water. I was bruised, cut, weak and tired and there was no one else to help me and Pratcher carry Major Baldwin."

SINCE his high school track days, Russ had lifted weights to keep in shape, but this ordeal called for all the stamina he could muster. The rear guard caught up with them and passed them for a while. With nothing between them and the pursuing enemy but an occasional tree, Hunt elected to risk taking the trail. It was the only place they could walk and not stumble. It was the only way to get Major Baldwin down that hill by themselves. Hunt led the way, keeping a sharper eye on the brush than he ever had while stalking turkey, squirrel and deer in his West Virginia woods.

"I worried about ambush and mines all the way down," he recalls. "I kept my grenade handy. If they jumped us I wanted to take some of them with us. We just had to stop once and rest. The major was still unconscious."

"We finally made it to the bottom of the hill and the little stream. I laid Major Baldwin right in the water so I could wash him and cool him off. I tried everything I could think of to revive him. I finally called for the medic. He heard me and came over."

"The major is dead," he told me. That's what gets you. You do all you can and it's still not enough. It really hurts."

Now he had to make a landing zone. There were tall trees on every side of the bomb crater there in the bamboo thicket. The FAC didn't think it was big enough.

"But Lieutenant Lyall got on the radio," Russ said. "He said to the FAC, 'you tell our boys that I said it is big enough and to come on in and get us.' I started stomping down some of the bamboo around the edges. It was tight, but the pilot knew I was a qualified crew chief and he trusted me."

And that's the way Captain Allen found him that late afternoon, stretched to his full six feet "completely ignoring the firing down there along the stream while he eased me through that hole." Hunt doesn't even remember who was flying that helicopter. Or the others either. He just knew it was the way home for his dead commander and the seriously wounded. As he sent the second aircraft out with its load of wounded, including Lieutenant Lyall, he still didn't remember that the last aircraft up there didn't even have a hoist to lift him out.

But Green Hornet Four, piloted by Lt. Louis Vasquez, made it down. Hunt helped his wounded assistant aboard and climbed up himself. As they pulled away, someone handed him a lighted cigarette. Too spent to protest, he puffed on the butt.

It was the first time he had ever smoked.



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DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
WASHINGTON

SPECIAL ORDER
GB-93

5 March 1968

1. By direction of the President, each of the following is awarded the Air Force Cross for extraordinary heroism while participating in military operations against an opposing armed force on the date indicated:

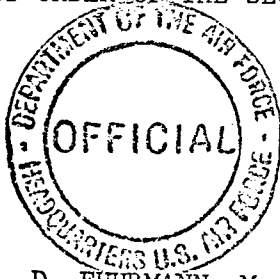
LT COL THOMAS H KIRK, JR, FR20794, 28 Oct 67
MAJ ROBERT E TURNER, FV3005953, 6 Jan 67
SGT RUSSELL M HUNT, AF13821861, 31 Mar 67

2. By direction of the President, each of the following is awarded the Legion of Merit for exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding service during the period indicated:

COL ALFRED C BIGUM, FR12796, 1 Mar 66 to 1 Sep 66
COL WILLIAM H STEWART, FR15123, 1 Jul 65 to 15 Dec 67

3. The 6924th Security Sq (USAFSS) is awarded the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award for exceptionally meritorious achievement in support of military operations from 15 Jul 67 to 16 Jul 67.

BY ORDER OF THE SECRETARY OF THE AIR FORCE



J. P. McCONNELL, General, USAF
Chief of Staff

J. D. FUHRMANN, Major, USAF
Asst. Director of Administrative Services

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